

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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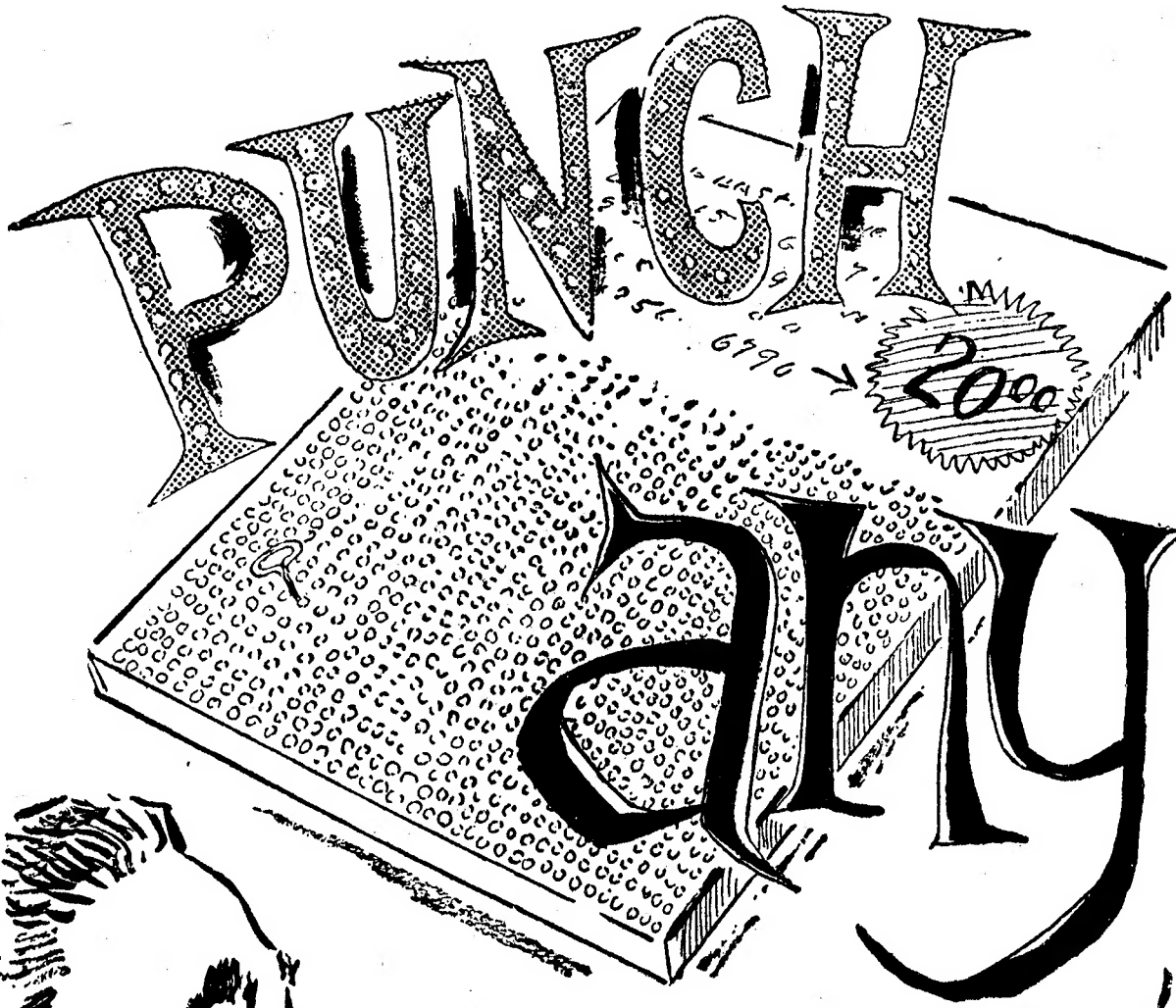
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A NOVELETTE



BY
JACK RITCHIE

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THE owner of the grocery store and I were the only ones in the place. I bought two packs of cigarettes, tore open the corner of one, and took my time about making a light.

He rang up the sale. "Stranger here?"

"Just going through."

He grinned slightly. "Care for a little gamble?"

"Depends on what."

He reached under the counter and brought out a punchboard. "Ten cents a chance."

It was one of the thousand-hole kind and it had cost him five dollars. About forty of the holes had

Ever since mankind discovered the first rudimentary counting method, the fascination with numbers has endured. Add to this the basic human desire for a large return on a small investment, stir well, and you have the punch called Punch Any Number.

PUNCH ANY NUMBER

already been punched and so he almost had his money back on that. A transparent plastic bag stapled to the side of the card held two flashlights, some tin cigarette lighters, and a few jackknives.

I took a few drags on my cigarette and studied the board.

"Man down the street got himself a flashlight," he said encouragingly. "Nice green one."

And probably spent a dollar doing it, I thought. The flashlights were worth maybe thirty-nine cents. "I'm already equipped. I got a jackknife and a lighter too."

He leaned forward on the counter. "In one of them little holes there's a piece of paper with the number 20 on it. If you get that, I pay you twenty bucks."

I didn't look convinced. "You're sure nobody's got it already? You're not handing me a used board?"

He was faintly aggrieved. "No, mister. The jackpot's still there."

A dime walked against 960 to 1 odds. I put one on the counter, took the key, and punched out a slot. I unrolled the tight paper. Nothing.

I fished for some more change. "Just like peanuts. Try one and you can't stop."

I lost thirty cents more and then punched out eight down and seven to the right on the center panel.

I unrolled the ribbon and handed it to him.

His mouth dropped.

"First time I ever won anything in my life," I said.

It took him a little sad head-shaking before he recovered enough to ring up a No Sale and hand me two tens.

The next punchboard was at Swede's Tavern, a block farther up the main street.

I collected another twenty there.

That was all for this town. I drove on to Eaton City.

It began yesterday when Irene Rogers came into my office and told me what was bothering her.

"How long has your husband been missing?" I asked her.

"Sam was supposed to phone me on Monday, or at the latest Tuesday. He didn't."

It was Thursday afternoon. "He hasn't been gone long. Maybe he's just on a drunk."

"He doesn't drink. Except for a small glass of beer now and then when he has to."

"I don't want to drive business away, Mrs. Rogers, but why don't you go to the police? There are a lot more of them than there are of me and they've got a nice efficient Missing Persons Bureau."

She was in her middle twenties

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and her green eyes seemed to weigh everything they saw. "If there's nothing really wrong, I don't want to get Sam into trouble."

"How could that happen?"

She studied me thoughtfully. "Anything I tell you is just between us? It doesn't travel?"

"It stays with me."

She took that. "Sam and Pete—that's Pete Cable—have themselves a little business. Pete goes on the road and sells punchboards anywhere he can—taverns, grocery stores, filling stations. The cards go for five dollars apiece. Each board gives the usual prizes—cheap knickknacks—but there's also a cash prize to make it really interesting. Twenty dollars. Whoever buys the board from Pete has to pay that money out of his own pocket when the number is punched, but even with that it still seems a good deal to a buyer."

She took a cigarette out of an ordinary metal case and tamped it on the lid. "There are a thousand holes at ten cents each on every board. The buyer stands to recover the original five dollars he paid for the board, plus about fifty before anybody punches out the money prize. After he pays out the twenty, he still has a nice profit. It could run to fifty dollars—depending on luck."

PUNCH ANY NUMBER

I lit her cigarette. "But it doesn't work out that way?"

"No. They're special boards and Pete knows which slot holds the money prize. He keeps a list of all the places where he's sold the cards and then phones it back to me. My husband follows his route three or four days later, buys a couple of gallons of gas, or a glass of beer, and gets invited to play the board. He wins the twenty."

I wondered if all of this still amounted to penny ante. "How many boards does Pete manage to get rid of on his trips?"

"Ten to fifteen a day."

I took twelve as a rough average. That meant that Sam Rogers, moving in Pete's footsteps, picked up about two hundred and forty bucks a day and they probably split that fifty-fifty.

Irene Rogers went on. "Pete always leaves the boards in small towns. We found that in the cities there's more of a chance of getting into trouble."

"You said that your husband was supposed to phone you. Don't you travel with him?"

"No. I usually stay at a hotel during the month or two we're in one territory. Right now I have a room in the Washington Hotel. Pete phones his list of places to me and I relay them to Sam on the road. He phones me every

third or fourth day, ordinarily."

"How long have you three been working this?"

"About three years."

Then give or take, Sam's share came to about thirty-five grand a year and I didn't think he bothered to give Uncle Sam any part of it. And I also thought about something else. Thirty-five thousand a year and a room at the Washington Hotel just didn't mix. It was a four-dollar-and-up place, and the up never went past seven. "Does Pete know that your husband is missing?"

She hesitated. "No."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"I didn't think that he'd want me to come to somebody like you." She flicked ash into the tray. "Last Wednesday when Sam phoned, I gave him Pete's latest list. He should have gone through it by either Monday or Tuesday and then phoned me again. But I haven't heard from him."

"Maybe he just didn't get through with his collections."

She shook her head. "Even if he hadn't, he still would have phoned. At least by now."

"Where is Pete Cable now?"

"I don't know. But when he's in town he usually stays at the Medford."

And that told me that Pete Cable, at least, believed in living it up.

Her eyes flickered. "I'd rather not have you see him just yet. Not until you've given this a try by yourself."

"Do you have a copy of the list you gave your husband the last time he phoned?"

She opened her purse and handed me a sheet of paper.

I read the first few lines.

Rockford—

Jack's Garage—L-18-2

Vi & Dick's Tavern—M-9-11

Harold's Tap—L-6-14

New Auburn—

Red Star Market—R-12-16

Clover Tavern—M-17-1

"There are forty-seven places on the list," Irene explained. "The letters L, M, and R, mean the left, middle, or right panels. The first number means down. The second means to the right." She produced a photograph of her husband.

Sam Rogers had small tight features and he looked as though something always bothered him.

"What kind of a car was he driving?"

"A 1956 sedan. Dark blue." She gave me the license number.

I wrote that down. "A 1956 sedan?"

"Sam thought it better not to be too conspicuous. Some country people distrust a stranger in a new car."

Something else occurred to me,

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though I didn't think it was too likely. "Have you ever thought that he might just have run out on you?"

Her face became expressionless. "If he did, I want to know about it."

I could have started from the top of Irene's list, but I thought it was more interesting to work from the bottom up. And I like twenties.

I got to Eaton City a few minutes after seven on Friday and stopped at Harrison's Drugstore. I bought another two packs of cigarettes and while I was lighting up, Harrison got around to his punchboard.

On the fourth try, I handed him the tape and looked surprised. "First time I ever won anything in my life."

He sighed when he handed me the twenty and looked up at the clock. "I should have closed at seven like always."

There was one other place in Eaton City. Turk's Service Station and Garage.

My tank was full, the oil okay, and the tires had the air they needed. I disconnected my horn and drove down the main street until I found the place.

A kid of about nineteen or twen-

ty came out of Turk's small office.

"Something seems to be wrong with my horn," I said.

He nodded and pulled up the hood.

I got out of the car and watched him. "Are you Turk?"

He grinned. "No. Just work here. Turk's inside."

I glanced through the open garage door. Turk was a burly man under a car on the rack. He looked like he didn't care for what he was doing for a living.

The kid found the wire after a few seconds. "Just disconnected, mister. Must have slipped off."

While he was there, he checked the oil and the water, and then put down the hood. "Gas?"

"No. Filled up a couple of miles back and then got this trouble. How much do I owe you?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Didn't take more than a minute."

He was about to go back inside the station without bringing up the subject of the punchboard.

I put my hand on the door lever of my car. "Stopped in at a drugstore down the street. The man had a punchboard and I lost half a buck."

The kid wiped his hands on a rag. "Turk had one of them things too. Had it four days and along come somebody and hits the big number. Cost Turk twenty bucks."

That could have been Sam Rogers—or maybe some one else punched the lucky number. I clicked my tongue sympathetically. "Probably somebody driving a Cadillac. Some people have all the luck."

He shook his head. "No. '56 Ford. Sort of small man. Worried looking. I thought he was even a little bit sick. Came in around seven-thirty in the evening."

I thought I could figure it from there. Sam had stopped here and picked up the twenty. Then he went on to Harrison's Drugstore. But Harrison closed at seven or soon after.

The chances were that Sam had decided to spend the night in town—it was late enough to call it a day. He could pick up the twenty at Harrison's in the morning and move on. But he had never gotten there.

I stretched. "Long day on the road. Is there any place in town where I could put up for the night?"

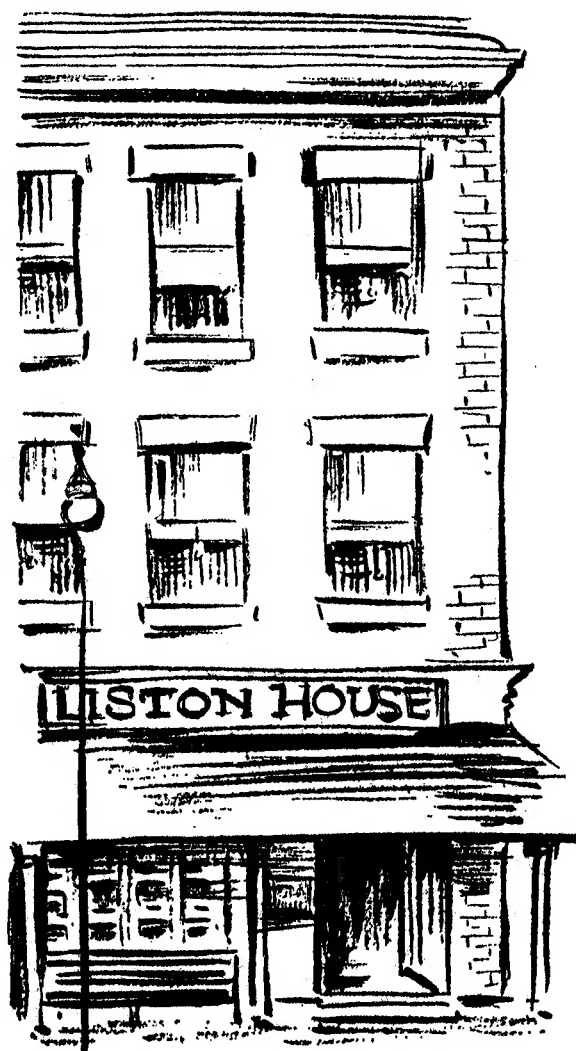
"The Liston House is the only place we got. It's small, but everybody says the beds are good. Right down on Main Street, back a block."

I parked my car on a side street and took my overnight bag to the Liston House.

It was an old-fashioned three-

story building and the lobby was empty. The man behind the desk put aside his magazine and rose. He was in his middle forties and wore rimless glasses. He watched me sign in. "Staying long?"

"Can't say. Got some business in town. Might take a couple days." I glanced at the names above mine and saw that I was the only one who'd registered today. "Business slow?"



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"That's right."

I turned back a page of the register.

There was a trace of sharpness in his voice. "What are you doing?"

"Just checking to see if Sam got here. Sam Rogers. Friend of mine." I found his name. He had registered a week ago. I looked up. "What room is he in?"

The clerk swiveled the register back into place. "He's not here. He checked out after one night."

I raised an eyebrow. "That's funny. He told me he'd be here a week or more."

"Well, he wasn't. He left the next morning. Early."

I frowned thoughtfully. "Did he get a telephone call?"

"There was no phone call."

"Or a telegram?"

"No telegram." He moved a pen back and forth on the blotter a couple of times. "You say you're a friend of his?"

"We're like brothers. He tells me everything."

He got a key from the board. "You're in Room 204. Want me to show you?"

"Never mind." I picked up my bag. "You're the bellboy too?"

"I'm everything," he said sourly. "Bellboy, switchboard operator, everything. Seven in the evening until seven in the morning."

But I didn't think things were



too rough for him. There was a well-worn couch behind the counter and he probably slept most of the night.

I left my bag in the room and went out for something to eat.

Sam Rogers had spent the night at the Liston House—or at least he had registered. He could suddenly have decided to take off and disappear. I would have to wait until tomorrow to do the checking I wanted and then I thought I would know more.

After eating I went to a bar, mostly to kill time. There isn't much else to do in a small town on a Friday night.

I got back to the Liston at about ten-thirty.

There was a knock at my door a few minutes later.

The florid-faced man had a .45 in his hand. He backed me into the room and closed the door behind him. "You've been picking yourself up a little change, haven't you, boy? Twenty here and twenty there?"

I said nothing.

The smile didn't go to his eyes. "Where's Sam? Or maybe I should ask what you did to him?"

"You got the wrong man. I don't know anybody named Sam."

He shook his head sadly. "Let's not play that way. We both know who and what I'm talking about."

I shrugged. "All right. I know somebody named Sam. And I'm supposed to have done something to him?"

"It's a guess. How else did you get hold of the list? And don't tell me you just got lucky on those punchboards. Who the hell are you anyway?"

The .45 steady in his hand told me it was time to stop fooling around. "Mike Regan."

"That's just a name. Toss over your wallet."

He flipped it open and saw my credentials. He looked up.

"Mrs. Rogers hired me to find her husband," I said. "He's missing."

He worked on that a few seconds and then tossed back the wallet. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Why should you be interested?"

"The name's Pete Cable. I guess Irene would have told you about me."

I nodded. "If you didn't know that Sam was missing, just what brought you here?"

He glanced at the automatic in his hand and then slipped it back into his pocket. "The last few weeks, Sam's been claiming that times have been bad. When he makes his collections, the odds say that about once in twenty times somebody lucky could get to the big number on the board before he does. I'm a reasonable man and I'll even settle for once in ten. But for almost a month Sam's been reporting that three or four times out of ten the number was already punched when he got there. I just didn't buy that.

"That's the way I began figuring it. I checked up and found he was lying to me."

"Why didn't you nail him down?"

"When he got through with the list you've been working on, I was

going to do that little thing. I got me a room in Sioux Falls—that's the last place on the list—and waited for Sam to show up. He didn't. That got me to fidgeting, but I still stayed there keeping an eye on the last board. Then one day I find that the big number had been taken. But not by Sam. By you. I got the description. I thought it might be a lucky shot by a stranger, but just the same I back-tracked. The next number was taken too. By you again. I wondered what the hell was going on. So I kept backing up. When I got here, Harrison's Drugstore was closed, but I went on to Turk's Service Station. I learned that you just picked up the number and were spending the night at this place."

I found a cigarette. "Sam registered here a week ago and then he disappeared. That's where I am now. Have you got any ideas about what might have happened?"

Cable did some thinking and then shrugged. "I don't know. Looks to me like he just skipped. Maybe he got the feeling that I was about to lower the boom. He probably headed for some place far away where he can get himself another partner and work the racket again."

"Why didn't he take his wife with him?"

Cable chuckled. "You don't know Sam the way I do. It wouldn't bother him none to leave her. The only thing he really loved was money and he was real tight with that." He brought out a cigar and unwrapped it. "What you going to do now, Regan?"

"What I'm paid to do. Look for him."

"It's a wide country. Lots of things to hide behind. But you're willing to travel as long as you get paid?"

"I got nothing against it."

He went to the door. "I'm getting a night's sleep here and then back to the big city. Medford Hotel. Give me a ring if you find Sam. Might be worth a couple hundred to me if I can get my hands on him."

When he was gone I locked the door.

Maybe Sam did skip. Or maybe he just planned to. But if he was a tight man with a buck, I thought he wouldn't make the move until he'd finished his collections—in this town anyway.

There was one other thing to consider. If you're planning to take off—from your partner and from your wife—you do at least one thing. You take your money along with you.

You don't leave it in a bank or a checking account. People can

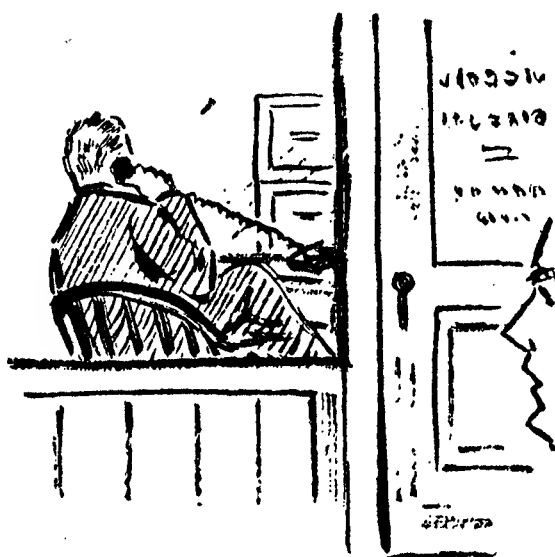
stop action on those things when you don't show up where and when you are expected.

In the morning I looked at the retainer check Irene Rogers had given me. The imprint showed that it was drawn on the Whitfield Savings Bank in St. Louis.

After a late breakfast, I took a walk through town and found that Eaton City had a branch bank. It was a small affair—the kind that opens four hours a day and even then doesn't do too much business. The building was small and one-storied and as far as I could see a girl clerk cashier and a man who might be her boss were the only employees.

I went into the cafe across the street, ordered coffee, and wondered how I could get the information I wanted now. I kept an eye on the bank and at ten-thirty I saw the manager reach for his hat. He came out of the bank accompanied by a man in overalls and they got into a pick-up truck. Probably a farmer negotiating for a loan, I thought, and the manager wanted a personal look at his assets. I thought they would be gone long enough for my purpose.

I went to the phone booth, looked up the number of the Eaton City Branch Bank, and jotted that down. Then I put in a long distance call to the St. Louis Bank.



When I got through and was channeled to somebody important, I said, "This is James Rhiordan. Eaton City."

"Yes?"

"I have a rather large check here just presented to me by a Mr. Sam Rogers. Twenty thousand dollars, to be exact. Mr. Rogers claims . . . *says* that he has a checking account at your bank."

He understood. "Your position with the Eaton City bank, Mr. Rhiordan?"

"Vice-president."

"And your number?"

I gave him the Eaton City bank phone number.

"We'll call you as soon as we have the information."

It would take Whitfield Savings only five minutes or less to find out how much Sam Rogers had in his account, but the reason for a call back was to make certain that

my curiosity was legitimate—that there *was* an Eaton City Branch bank and a Vice-President Rhiordan. Private citizens just don't call banks and hope to find out how much someone else has in his checking account.

I went across the street to the Eaton City bank and approached the girl. "My name is Rhiordan. Has there been a phone call for me? A message, perhaps?"

She raised an eyebrow.

I smiled. "I know it's an imposition, but you see I travel a lot and it's difficult for my bank to keep in touch with me should anything important arise. I suppose I could call every day myself, but sometimes weeks will go by in which I mount up long distance phone bills for no purpose at all. So we've decided that my bank would leave messages in the local banks of the towns on my general itinerary." I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter after ten. "I've made arrangements that my bank try to call between ten and ten-thirty, just in case I might be there myself." I smiled again. "There may actually not *be* a phone call—there usually isn't—but do you mind if I wait?"

A few moments thought decided her that she didn't mind.

Her phone rang four minutes later and she picked up the re-

ceiver. Her eyes widened slightly when she looked at me. "*Vice-president* Rhiordan?"

I grinned. "Yes. In St. Louis. But Henry is very stuffy. He always uses my title. Even on the phone." I reached for the receiver and then hesitated. "Do you mind if I take the call in there?" I indicated the glass-walled office behind her.

She was slightly dubious about that, but either my smile—and I turned that on—or the fact that I was a *vice-president* somewhere made her nod her head.

I went inside the office and picked up the receiver. When I saw her cradle her phone, I said, "Rhiordan speaking."

It was the same voice I'd heard before. "About that checking account. It's in the name of Sam and Irene Rogers. Our records show that there is only \$536.27 in the account at the moment."

"I see." There was another possibility. If a man keeps a checking account at a bank, the chances are good that he keeps his savings account there also. "Please hold the line for a moment," I said.

I waited about forty seconds and then said, "Mr. Rogers is here and he says that there must be some mistake. He says that he had the money in his *savings* account, but that he's written you authoriza-

tion to transfer twenty thousand to the checking account."

"Just a moment, please," the voice said.

Three minutes passed and the voice was back. "Mr. Rogers *had* a savings account here—and in *his* name only. \$35,812.39. But he closed it by mail and we sent him a draft for that amount ten days ago. We've since had a phone call from a Milwaukee bank and we verified the draft. Our information is that he cashed the draft there."

"Thank you for your trouble," I said. "I'll have to speak to Mr. Rogers."

"I'd do that if I were you," the voice agreed dryly.

When a man disappears with thirty-five thousand dollars he does it because he wants to—or because somebody else wants it to be that way.

I thanked the girl behind the counter and walked back to the Liston House.

The day desk clerk, a cheerful-looking man in his fifties, got up.

"I'm already registered," I said. I decided it wouldn't do any harm to ask him if he might know anything about Rogers. "I wonder if you could help me. I'm looking for a Sam Rogers. He was registered here a week ago and then he just seems to have disappeared. Per-

haps he told you where he might be going?"

The clerk went over the book until he found Rogers' name and then thought about it. Finally he shook his head. "Afraid I can't help you. Never even saw him, as far as I can remember."

Then something did come to his mind. "There was a note on the pad to give him a call at six-thirty in the morning. I saw that when I came on at seven and it hadn't been checked off. I asked Bert about it—thinking that he might have forgotten to wake the man—but Bert said to cross it off. Rogers had already left. Bert's the night man here. Bert Dryer."

"I'd like to talk to Bert. Where can I find him?"

"He has a little cottage just outside of town. Sort of a rundown place and he lives alone."

I got more specific directions then drove to Bert's house. It was a ramshackle affair with two fifty-five gallon fuel oil tanks on a rack beside the kitchen window. A sagging barn and a few small sheds were on the property too. A beat-up old sedan was parked on the gravel driveway.

I pulled up behind it and went to the back door. There was no answer to my knocks. The car in the driveway told me that he was probably home, but if so, he was

playing possum for reasons of his own.

I went over to the barn and opened one of the big double doors.

Parts of a car were scattered around inside and someone had evidently been using a torch to cut the body into pieces. I thought it might have been a dark blue '56 sedan.

I looked for license plates, but there were none. However the motor was still there and I copied the block number.

I went back to the house and knocked once more. Then I tried the door.

Bert Dryer was there and he had a good reason for not coming to the door. He lay on his back on the littered kitchen floor. His wide open eyes were looking at nothing in this world. It had been a fast death and one bullet in the chest had done the job.

I went through the small living room and took a look at the bedroom. The house wasn't too clean, but as far as I could tell, nothing had been disturbed.

I wiped my prints off the back door knob and went to my car. I drove back to Eaton City and went to the phone booth in a drugstore.

I put in a call to the State Motor Bureau in Missouri.

"This is Sheriff Rhiordan in

Eaton City, Wisconsin," I said. "I have an abandoned vehicle here carrying your state's license plates."

Evidently he reached for his pencil. "What's the number?"

I gave him Sam Rogers' license plate number. "And check out the motor number too. The plates might not belong to the car." I gave him the motor block number I'd copied in Bert Dryer's barn.

"It'll take ten, fifteen minutes," he said. "Want me to call back?"

"No. I'm not in my office. Won't be back there for a while either. Suppose I call you?"

That was all right with him. Getting a car identified wasn't as private as finding out somebody's bank balance and he didn't have to check up on me.

I made a chocolate soda last twenty minutes and then phoned him again.

"The license plates were issued to a Sam Rogers in St. Louis." He gave me the address of one of that city's hotels.

"What about the motor number? His car?"

"Yes. That checks."

I thanked him and hung up.

When you want to get rid of a car, you have your troubles. If you push it over a cliff or drop it into water, nine times out of ten, somebody will find it sometime and begin asking questions about it.

But if you take the car apart, cut it into pieces, and drop a fender here, a door there—in a dump, in the woods, in a lake, nobody's going to get too curious about why the piece is there. And it looked like that's what Bert Dryer had been doing with Sam Rogers' car.

But why?

It didn't take too much imagination to figure something logical. Suppose Bert had killed Sam Rogers. And why would he kill Sam? As far as I knew Bert and Sam had never seen each other until Sam registered at the Liston House, so that let out anything personal. And that left only one strong motive. Money.

Sam had been planning to skip out on his wife and his partner. He had closed his savings account in St. Louis and cashed the draft in Milwaukee. He had been carrying the money with him and somehow Bert had found out about it.

But now Bert was dead. I thought that meant that Bert had had help when he got rid of Rogers—someone who had been afraid that Bert might get weak—or someone who didn't want to share the money with him.

I made a call to the Washington Hotel and got Irene Rogers.

"I'm afraid I've got bad news for you," I said. "It looks to me like your husband is dead. It's my

guess that he's been murdered."

There was a silence and then a calm voice. "Tell me about it."

I told her what I knew and what I suspected. "Did you know he had the thirty-five thousand on him?"

She hesitated and then made up her mind. "I might as well tell you. Sam and I were going to break with Pete after he got through with this last list. Sam withdrew his money from the bank and was carrying it with him. He's built that way. He didn't want it out of his sight. We were going to the East Coast. Did you go to the police?"

"Not yet. Should I?"

Her voice was definite. "No."

"They'll be in on it eventually. When Bert's body is found, the police will also learn that I asked where he lived. They'll question me and I'll have to tell all I know just to protect myself."

"If the police get hold of the thirty-five thousand I might have a lot of trouble claiming it. After all, Sam didn't get it exactly clean and legal. If you find the money before the police—and don't tell them about it—five thousand of it is yours. Does that impress you?"

"I'm impressed. I'll do the best I can."

When I stepped out of the drugstore, Pete Cable was standing

there, waiting, on the sidewalk.

He smiled. "Been busy?"

"I thought you were going back to the big city."

"I got to thinking things over and I decided that maybe there was more to all of this than meets the eye." He worked the cellophane off a cigar. "So I decided that maybe I ought to stick around and see how you operate. This morning I followed you to that little place outside of town and watched. When you drove away, I took a look in the barn myself and saw the pieces of a car. And I thought to myself that the paint job looked kind of familiar. Then I took myself to the house and opened the door like you did. The man was mighty dead, wasn't he?"

"I didn't make him that way."

He nodded agreeably. "Didn't say that you did. Didn't even think so. Besides I didn't hear a shot. But it got me to thinking more. Why should somebody be cutting up Sam's car? And why would somebody want to kill that poor little old man? Night clerk at the Liston House, wasn't he? So I came back here and drove along Main Street until I saw your car."

"Did all your thinking give you any answers?"

"Not exactly. But I always feel that when there's trouble, there's money at the bottom of it. Right?"

"Nice day today, isn't it?"

He puffed a light to his cigar and threw away the match. "I noticed while I was poking around that place the cops didn't show up. I guess you forgot to call them?"

"But *you* took care of that for me, didn't you?"

"Slipped my mind too." Now his smile disappeared. "Let's level. What's this all about? I'll find out sooner or later. Why play coy with me?"

"There's nothing to be coy about. I don't know any more than you do."

He glared at me. "There's a body in the house and in the barn there's a cut-up car. The police will get to wondering why the night clerk was going through all that trouble and they'll trace the car. That will bring Sam into the picture. The police will keep pulling on the string and that means that Irene, and you, and eventually me, will all get into the act. I don't know how clean you are, Regan, but I don't want too many people to know too much about me. I'd like to run, but my brain tells me to stay around if I want to protect myself. What the hell happened to Sam? Did he just skip out or is there something else I should know?"

"I haven't got a thing to offer you, Cable. I'm walking in a cloud

myself." I got into my car and pulled away from the curb.

And now I wondered about Pete Cable. Was his mind as blank about this as he said? Or was it possible that he had actually caught up with Rogers and gotten rougher than he had planned? But then how did Bert Dryer fit in on this? I didn't think that Cable would go to a stranger and say, "Look, I've got a body and a car to get rid of. How about lending me a hand? I found thirty-five thousand and we can split that for your trouble." And yet Bert Dryer was in on this up to his dead neck.

I glanced at the rear-view mirror. A two-tone Buick was following me and I had been expecting that.

I pulled up at a small department store and went inside. The Buick parked fifty feet behind my car. Now Cable had the choice of waiting for me to come out of the front of the store or the rear. He couldn't be in both places at once. He probably swore, but he decided to stick with my car. If I shook him, at least he'd make me walk.

I used the rear exit and followed the alley toward the Liston House.

I wondered about Irene Rogers. She'd been with Rogers for three years and it looked like Sam hadn't been spending much money on her. And he didn't seem to be the

kind who ever would. Had she decided that this was the best time to get hold of the thirty-five thousand—when Sam had it with him, not in a personal bank account?

Did she need Bert's help to get rid of the body and the car? Or was he blackmailing her and she had then decided to get rid of him?

But if she had the money, why had she brought me into this at all? She didn't need me and she wouldn't want me to do any digging. She could simply have put the money away and reported to the police that her husband was missing—if she wanted to bother about that at all.

Then who was Bert Dryer's partner? If it wasn't Cable or Irene, who else was left? It could be anybody, but I thought I had one good bet left.

The day clerk at the Liston House looked up when I entered. "Find Bert?"

"I knocked, but I guess he wasn't home."

The day clerk was a small man. Just like Bert. Would it take two men that size to move a body?

A card table had been set in the lobby and a pinochle game was in progress. The players all seemed to be in their late sixties or the seventies. I lit a cigarette and turned back to the day clerk. "You

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work here all day, every day?"

He smiled faintly. "Have to. I own the place. Frank Liston's the name." He watched the card players for a moment. "Long hours, but it's really not too hard. Mostly sitting and waiting for something to happen and there hasn't been too much of that in the last ten years. Sunday's my only day off. Hire one of the college boys to take over. Only twenty-one, but dependable."

I wasn't interested in the college boy. I didn't think Bert would turn to him if he needed help to cover up a murder.

"Do you sleep here?" I asked.

"No. My wife and I got a little cottage on Chestnut."

"Bert Dryer been with you long?"

"Twelve years." His eyes went past me to the front door and I turned. A burly gray-haired State Trooper was turning the old-fashioned brass knob.

"That's Sergeant Stark," Liston said. "Looks serious about something."

Stark approached the desk. "Frank, I've got some bad news. Bert Dryer's dead."

Liston's mouth dropped. "Dead? Did he have an accident?"

Stark shook his head. "It was no accident, Frank. He was shot. Jim Hagen delivered a load of fuel oil to Bert's place a little while ago

and when he was filling the barrels he happened to look into the kitchen window. He saw Bert lying on the floor."

Frank Liston looked at me and I thought I'd better do the talking about myself before he did. "I was out there just an hour ago, Sergeant. I knocked, but there was no answer and so I came back here."

Stark regarded me with interest. "Why did you want to see Bert?"

I showed him my credentials. "I was hired by a Mrs. Rogers to find her husband. He disappeared about a week ago. I traced him to this hotel. He registered, went to his room, and, according to Bert Dryer, left early the next morning. I tried to pick up from there, but I hit a dead end. So I thought I'd go to Bert again, figuring that he might remember something else that might help me."

"What does this Rogers look like?"

I gave him the photograph.

He studied it. "Never saw him around here." He handed back the snapshot. "A missing man and a murder? Do we have a coincidence here, or do they touch each other?"

"I have no idea, Sergeant."

"You say that you traced Rogers to this hotel? How?"

I told him about the punch-board routine Rogers and Cable had worked up for themselves. He

would find out about that later anyway and it would look much better for me if I told him myself. "Cable is in town now. If you want to talk to him before he leaves, you might look down Main Street. I saw him parked there not long ago." I described Cable and his car.

The sergeant looked dubious. He seemed to be thinking that the disappearance of Rogers and the punchboard racket needed looking into, but did they actually have anything to do with the murder he was working on now? Evidently he decided that he couldn't afford to overlook speaking to Cable. He moved toward the door. "Don't leave town for a while, Regan. We might have more to talk about."

When he was gone I slipped into the phone booth and called Irene Rogers. "The body of the night clerk has been found. The police have talked to me."

"What have you told them so far?"

"Just that I was looking for your husband. The punchboards came into the conversation too, but I didn't mention that your husband was carrying thirty-five thousand dollars with him."

"They'll find out about that too."

"Maybe. But if I don't tell them and you don't, who will? The man

who killed Bert Dryer? I think we've still got a chance to get to the money before the police do. They'll be wanting to talk to you too when they find the connection between Dryer and your husband. You can be expecting to hear from them."

"All right. I'll keep quiet about the money."

I didn't see Stark again until five that afternoon.

He eased himself into one of the lobby chairs. "We found your man, Sam Rogers."

I looked pleased. "Where was he hiding?"

"In the ground." Stark found a cigarette and lit it. "We had men going over Bert Dryer's grounds. First they found a little hole about a foot deep behind one of Bert's sheds. From the outline we could make out at the bottom, it looked to us like somebody had dug up a cashbox. One of those little metal ones that most folks have in their homes for personal papers."

"Somebody murdered Bert for his money?"

"We thought of that, even though Bert never made much money or was known to keep it. But then we found a spot of disturbed ground in the patch of woods behind Bert's place. We dug down about two and a half feet and found Sam Rogers' body."

"How did he die?"

"We did an autopsy this afternoon. He died of a heart attack." Stark dragged at his cigarette. "And in the barn we found pieces of a car. We traced it through the motor block number. It belonged to Rogers. By the way, the sergeant at the Missouri Motor Bureau says that this morning somebody else called him about that car. A Sheriff Rhiordan of Eaton City."

"Have you talked to him?"

"There is no Sheriff Rhiordan." Stark watched me. "You wouldn't know anything about that call, would you, Regan?"

I adjusted my halo. "I'm afraid not, Sergeant."

Stark stared out of the window for a few moments. "The parts of this puzzle are far apart and a lot of them are missing, but I'll try making up a story. It's the only one I can think of now. Rogers registered at the hotel. Sometime during the night he had a fatal heart attack. Maybe he managed to call Bert to his room for help before he died. Or maybe Bert just found him."

"That still doesn't explain why Bert should bury him."

"I figure that the reason was money. Rogers had enough of it with him to make Bert do what I think he did. He found the money and he decided it ought to be his."

"Then why not just take it? Why go through the trouble of burying Rogers?"

"Because the odds were strong that somebody was bound to know that Rogers was carrying it. His wife. Perhaps his relatives. If Rogers' body was found without the money, there'd be an investigation and Bert would be in for trouble. The money *and* Rogers had to disappear. If there was a police investigation, the authorities would eventually come to the conclusion that Rogers decided to disappear—for reasons of his own. Happens every day."

"But then somebody killed Bert. Why?"

"For the money. Either somebody found out that he had it, or Bert had help in pulling this off and his partner decided he'd rather have all of it, instead of having to divide it up between them."

"What time was Bert shot?"

"The coroner puts it at about ten this morning."

"Do you have any idea at all who might have done it?"

"I had a good one. I thought of Frank Liston. He seemed about the most logical person Bert might turn to. Bert didn't have many friends and Liston might be tempted. His business hasn't been too good. But if Liston was Bert's partner, he couldn't have killed

Bert. He never left the hotel at all this morning, from about nine until I got there. There was a pinochle game going on in the lobby—some of the retired folks get together every once in a while for a game—and every one of the players swears that Liston never left his desk all morning."

Stark got to his feet. "I'll have to ask you to stay in town a little while longer. And I'd like Mrs. Rogers' address. I'll have to tell her about her husband and I'd like to ask her some questions."

I gave him the information and after I watched the patrol car pull away from the curb, I picked up my car.

When I pulled in at Turk's Service Station, the kid came out of the office.

This time I showed him my credentials. "Last night I asked you about a man who got the winning number on your punchboard." I showed him Rogers' photograph. "Is this him?"

The kid nodded. "That's the man."

"His name is Sam Rogers. I want you to tell me everything that happened when he was here. Everything. What he did, what he said."

The kid thought about it. "Well, he pulled in here at about eight in the evening. He had me check his

oil, but the stick showed that he didn't need any. Then he mentioned that he'd tried a punchboard back in River Falls and he wasn't lucky. So I told him that we had one too and maybe his luck would change. We went inside the office and Turk got out the card. Rogers got the lucky number after two or three punches."

"Then he left?"

"No. He asked where Harrison's drugstore was. I told him, but I said that Harrison closed at seven, except on Saturday nights. Then Rogers asked if there was any place where he could stay for the night. I told him that there was the Liston House just down the street."

"And that was all?"

"No. He said he had a flat tire. His spare in the trunk. He got it on the road and had to change it himself. Turk said that we were pretty busy right then and it would be a while before he could get around to it. We weren't too busy, but Turk was still steaming at Rogers picking the lucky number and I guess he just wanted to get back at Rogers some way. So Rogers said he'd leave the tire there and what time did we open in the morning so he could pick it up. Turk said nine. Rogers thought that over and said that he'd hoped to be on the road earlier. So Turk

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said he'd bring the tire to the hotel when he got through fixing it. Rogers should leave his car in the parking lot behind the hotel. Rogers paid him for the work right then and drove off."

I looked into the office. Turk was busy filling out what looked like order blanks at the desk. "Turk fixed the tire and then took it over to the hotel?"

The kid nodded. "About an hour later he got around to it. We took the pick-up and drove over."

"Did Rogers leave the key to his trunk here?"

The kid scratched his head. "Come to think of it, he didn't."

"When did Turk get back?"

"He didn't. Phoned me in about a half an hour and said he wasn't feeling too good. Told me to shut up the place for the night. It was about a quarter to ten then."

I looked at my car. "The tires look a little soft to me. How about some air?"

While the kid went at that, I walked into the office. Turk looked up for a second and then went back to his figures.

I put a nickle in the cashew machine and turned the lever. "Nice town," I said. "But I hear you got your troubles."

He looked up. "What troubles?"

"Heard you had a murder. Somebody named Bert Dryer."

He went back to his paperwork. "Yeah. I heard about it."

I did a little chewing and then, "Well, that doesn't concern me. Not my case."

His eyes came up.

"The department has me looking for a Sam Rogers," I said. "We traced him to this town and then he disappeared."

He took hold of two words. "The department?"

I nodded and brought out the photograph. "You wouldn't have seen him around here?"

His face became expressionless. "I don't have a good memory for faces."

I sighed. "Been after him for some time. The last information we had was that he was carrying thirty-five thousand of the stuff."

He seemed to be perspiring faintly. "The stuff?"

I finished the cashews and dusted the salt from my fingers. "Thirty-five thousand. All of it counterfeit."

I went back out to my car, tipped the kid for checking the tires, and drove away. I took the car three blocks to the top of the hill on Main Street and parked. I turned in my seat and watched Turk's Service Station.

I thought I could put together a story that fitted now. Turk had fixed the tire and taken it to the

Liston House parking lot. He needed the key to open the trunk of Rogers' car. He had gone up to Rogers' room and knocked. There had been no answer and Turk had tried the doorknob. He had found Rogers dead.

What would Turk do next? I thought that his first reaction would be to rush downstairs to the desk and tell Bert Dryer. Both of them had returned to the room. After their initial shock, perhaps they had pried around a little. And they had found the money.

It was more than they had ever seen in their lives and they hadn't been able to turn their backs on it. They had decided that Rogers and everything that belonged to him had to disappear.

But then I had come to Eaton City and begun asking about Sam Rogers. Bert had phoned Turk and told him about me. Had Turk decided that he would be much safer with Bert out of the way? Or just richer? Had he forced Bert to reveal where he had hidden his share of the money and then killed him?

I thought that's the way things had gone.

Now Turk had thirty-five thousand dollars and he had committed a murder to get it. He was going to hang on to it.

But not if he thought the money

was counterfeit. Then it was just paper, but it was paper that could send him to the chair. He would have to get rid of it and the sooner the better.

Where had Turk hidden the thirty-five thousand? In his service station? I thought not. Besides the kid working there, customers would be wandering in and out. There was too much of a chance that someone might accidentally run across it.

In his home? That was a good bet. I thought he'd want to keep it near him.

Below me the pick-up pulled out of the station and I could make out Turk at the wheel. I made a U-turn and followed, keeping two blocks behind and making sure that there were always at least two cars between him and me.

He turned off Main Street after three-quarters of a mile. This was residential and I dropped farther behind. The houses began to thin out fast and it became almost country.

He turned up the driveway beside a modest house set back on four or five acres of land. When I passed, he had parked and was striding toward a garage.

I drove on to where I could park and still keep an eye on the place.

I felt sure that he was after the money—or what he now thought

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was just worthless pieces of paper.

Would he burn it? There was a danger of that, but I'd noticed that most of the people around here had oil burners to heat their homes and very few of them will take rubbish. If he went from the garage to the house, I would have to move in fast.

When he came out of the garage he was carrying a package about the size of a shoe box. He got back into the pick-up and when he reached the road he turned in my direction.

After he passed, I started the car. I kept a half a mile behind him, trailing behind other cars on the

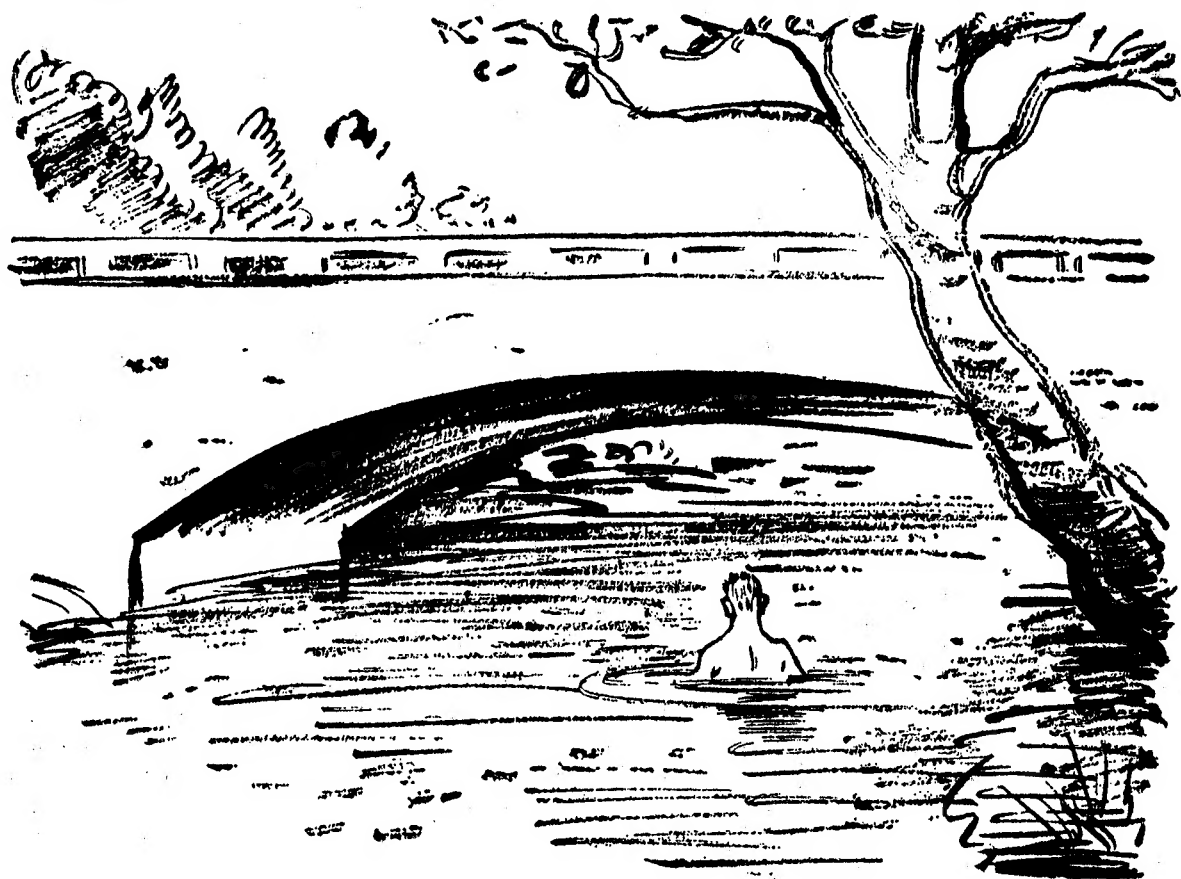
open highway, but still keeping him in sight.

Eventually he pulled up on the bridge over a small river.

When I passed him, I had one hand covering my face while I lit a cigarette. But he wasn't looking at the traffic. He had the hood of the pick-up open and was peering at the motor.

I went over the next hill and parked on the shoulder of the road. I walked back to a point where I could just see the bridge and Turk's truck.

The hood was still up and Turk appeared to be working on something under it. But every once in



a while he paused and glanced up.

I thought I knew what he was waiting for. He wanted the road clear of all traffic. That time came about seven or eight minutes later.

He quickly reached into the cab, brought out the package, and gave it a heave into the river. Then he jumped into the truck and headed back to Eaton City.

I ran to my car and drove to the bridge. The river was only about sixty feet wide and it was moving sluggishly. If the package had floated, it couldn't have gone far, but I thought it more likely that Turk had weighted it.

Under the bridge I stripped to my shorts. The river was shallow—the water never getting higher than my chest. I waded from bank to bank a half a dozen times before I finally stepped on the package.

I dried myself with a couple of handkerchiefs and back in the car I opened the box. The thirty-five thousand dollars was there and still dry in two cash boxes. One of

them, I felt sure, had once belonged to Bert Dryer.

I drove north through a couple of small towns until I found a bus station with lockers. I rented one, put the money inside, and then drove back to Eaton City.

Would the police eventually get to Turk? I rather thought so. They are quite efficient.

And he would tell them why he had killed Bert and where he had gotten rid of the money. They would drag the river, but eventually have to stop with the idea that the current was enough to drag the box somewhere out of reach.

Thirty-five thousand dollars. Five for me and thirty for Irene?

I smiled.

I would tell Irene that I never did get near the money.

It would be a sad thing for her, but I thought that we would get together again anyway. Irene, and me, and maybe Pete Cable.

That punchboard racket looked good to me.



And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should find it gratifying to receive your reaction to the stories in it. Write to me at 2441 Beach Court, Palm Beach Shores, Riviera Beach, Florida.



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